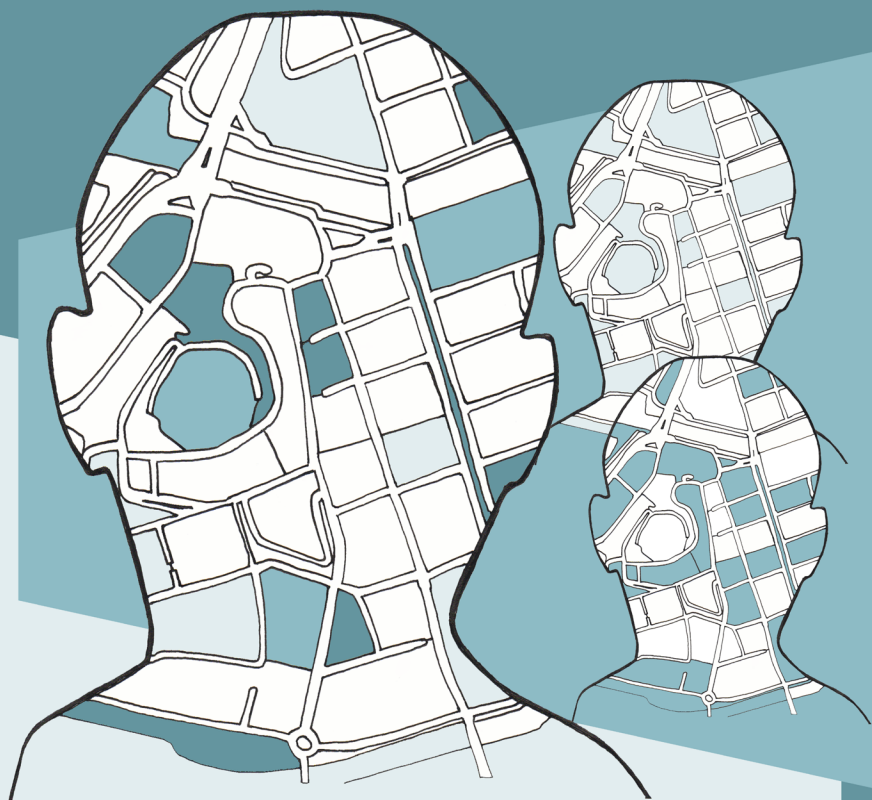


FROM ARROGANCE TO INTIMACY

A HANDBOOK FOR ACTIVE DEMOCRACIES



ANDY WILLIAMSON & MARTIN SANDE

You Are Here

We have a problem. Too many of us feel that democracy is broken. Too many of us distrust our politicians, despair at the rise of bureaucracy and feel ignored when it comes to the decisions that affect our lives. These are the same lives that have changed beyond recognition over the last 50 years (and especially the last 10). Thanks to digital and social tools we are now more connected than at any time in human history and yet we often feel more isolated and lost than ever before. We have replaced community with light connections. And despite the constancy of change some things have failed to keep pace. Our systems of governance and representation, for example, feel like they have hardly moved. As our lives and our societies have become faster, more complex, more open and more challenging, democracy appears stubbornly rooted in the past. It remains largely impervious to the changes around it.

Democracy has become a giant project in which shadowy actors seek to manage and control. Not just politicians and civil servants but lobbyists, public affairs and corporate agendas. Far from being a liberator and igniter of community action, democracy all too often feels restrictive, drawing us towards a dulled-down normative state of inaction and compliance. Our democracies are too complex. So complex few of us really know how they work. Too complex to have been designed, this is not some giant conspiracy theory just a dysfunctional ecosystem. Our democracies have evolved over time to be closed and opaque. They have evolved to privilege some of us (the few) over others (the many) and they have become exclusive and

excluding. Even where this is not through intent, it has happened through presumed practicality. And it is wrong.

Our democracies rarely reflect the communities that they are supposed to help. Put bluntly, our democratic systems have become arrogant and controlling. This cannot continue. Many of us are questioning the status quo and increasingly citizens are refusing to accept things as they are. Right around the world people are refusing to accept closed, opaque, slow and sly democracy. And let's be clear, the challenge is not when but how we are going to change.

Our current democratic systems often appear as out of balance hierarchies: representatives at the top, the public at the bottom with various intermediaries in between. Some of these intermediaries are connectors, some are blockers. Many people don't like this because they sense an inherent unfairness. Some people pretend they don't like it, but in reality it suits them because hierarchies are about power – hierarchies are arrogant and controlling and “there needs to be a significant rebalancing of power”.¹

We believe it's time to start thinking differently, to reframe democracy and we have the opportunity to do this together. To start seeing society as a network and democratic representation happening in the context of this network. This networked democracy lets us focus on mutuality, trust and co-creation. It allows us to see the system and those who represent us in that system as part of our network. When we do, we can start to become intimate and co-creating. And where we do we create the intention to shift power so it's used 'with' and not 'against'; for the benefit of all not the privilege of the few.

This book is our attempt to start the shift away from arrogance towards intimacy. It started as a conversation and we hope it will help

¹ The Power Inquiry. (2006). Power to the people. York: Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust & Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust.

start some more conversations. We hope that it will play a small part in helping us to shape a better democratic future. But we have to caution you that this is not a book about simple solutions. The problem is too complex for that. Nor do we believe that we have all the answers. That would be arrogant. All we have to offer are our shared experiences and perspectives. We also have a lot of questions to ask you and some ideas that, we hope, will help stimulate your thinking and our shared actions. We want to help you challenge current assumptions about how democracy works and start to rebuild a new, more inclusive democracy.

This book is about igniting change. We believe that it's the small incendiary changes that, when brought together, can re-shape governance, democracy and representation into something we recognise as being a valid, valuable and trusted part of our networked age. But it can't really be a 'how to' guide to better democracy either. Democracy is too nuanced, far too contextual. It is too rich for that to be possible. So on a practical level we hope it will start you thinking, exploring and accelerating your ideas as you start to co-design a new democracy to meet your community's future needs (with the emphasis on the personal and communal – on the local).

Before we can do this, we need to break democracy down to its basic elements, into a number of constituent parts. Most obvious is the part where citizens are engaged in some form of consultation but this is an action point surrounded by both internal (governmental) process and by external civic action. Less obvious but equally important are the cultural and organisational processes that support or inhibit access, accessibility and engagement. Again these exist not only inside our institutions but within and between all the different actors, including within the architecture of the digital networks that we take for granted but which are vulnerable to control and manipulation. So, this is a book about process: an emergent process. It's a book about vision. This is why we want to partner with you to co-create new ways of

doing democracy. And above all it's not a book for the radicals, the political anoraks and geeks, the anarchists or the extreme. It's a book for everyone, those on the inside as much as those on the outside. Our point: democracy is everyone's responsibility and to co-create a system that works we need everyone involved.

It's time to take you from this old world of arrogance and control to a new one of intimacy and co-creation! We've created this book because we believe change is needed. We hope we can (in a small way at least) inspire, lead, guide and support you, your organisation, your community and the people around you on a journey from outmoded ways of decision making to ones that support dynamic, organic and pro-social ways of connecting, conversing and deciding.

This is a process, not an event. And, as we'll see, the journey to active democracies is long overdue. We have come to a critical moment in time where we need to re-invent what we mean by democracy, when we have to re-think the processes that make our society function. Otherwise we're simply dinosaurs staring at an approaching comet.

The journey matters. And, like all journeys, re-building democracy is going to have highs and lows, problems and opportunities. There are challenges and hopefully some golden moments. Above all there is the potential for transformation and learning to come from these pages. This is a learning journey, an explorative one with no fixed destination, just a lot of history, a lot of chances to stop, reflect, and to innovate. Hopefully it's a journey that comes with passion and energy to do stuff better. And above all it will come with personal as well as organisational and systemic transformation.

Because every step you take is a place to learn.

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Our democracies have become arrogant and controlling.

It's time to take democracy on a journey towards a new world of intimacy and co-creation. To go from outmoded ways of decision making to ones that support dynamic, organic and pro-social ways of connecting, conversing and deciding.

We need to create networked, active democracies and this book is about how we make that happen.



Dr Andy Williamson is the Founder of Democratiser. He works globally to re-imagine leadership, strengthen democracy and transform engagement, working with parliaments, governments and civil society.



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